

INTERNATIONAL

Deadlock on Lithuania Is Broken at Talks; Supreme Soviet Compromises on Economy

Moscow Agrees to a Partial
Lifting of Its Blockade
In a Sign Crisis Is Easing

A WALL STREET JOURNAL News Roundup

MOSCOW—The Soviet Union broke the deadlock over Lithuania yesterday by agreeing to ease its economic embargo and resume shipping 15% of Lithuania's natural gas needs.

"We are beginning to move toward a solution," Soviet Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov told reporters during a series of discussions between Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene and Kremlin officials. The Reuters news agency quoted him as saying, "People are starting to understand that by choosing that path they went into a dead end." He added in reference



Boris Yeltsin

to Lithuania's March 11 declaration of full, immediate independence, "Now, it appears to me they understand."

In response to that declaration, President Mikhail Gorbachev imposed sweeping economic sanctions and said he wouldn't meet with Lithuanian leaders until they suspended or rescinded their declaration of secession.

However, he changed his stance. Mr. Gorbachev met with the presidents of the three Baltic republics Tuesday and told them that negotiations on a changed status can begin if the republics simply freeze their independence declarations for the duration of the talks. Estonia and Latvia have been pursuing independence more cautiously than Lithuania.

Mr. Gorbachev's backing away from confrontation over regional independence was an attempt to retain the political initiative in the face of bold moves by his rival Boris Yeltsin.

Mr. Gorbachev proposed to leaders of the nation's 15 republics that the Soviet Union be reconstructed as a kind of loose federation with Moscow retaining undisputed control only in key areas of national concern, such as defense and foreign affairs.

A committee to design the federation could be formed within a week, according to Mr. Gorbachev's press secretary Arkady Maslennikov.

"It's the first time I've heard that formula, not as bigger and smaller, but as equal partners," said Latvian President Anatolijs Gorbunovs.

Mr. Gorbachev's advisers and supporters say these moves are signs of his sincere desire to resolve the thorny issue of republics' desires for independence. But they also indicate his recognition that events are moving with or without his participation.

Mr. Yeltsin has intensified that pressure. Elected president of the Parliament of the Soviet Union's largest republic, Russia, two weeks ago, Mr. Yeltsin has already started bilateral talks with the leaders of other republics. His own Parliament Tuesday overwhelmingly passed a declaration of sovereignty, saying Russia's laws would be supreme in its territory.

"There is an absolutely new strong political force in the Soviet Union, and that is a democratic Russia," said Igor Gryazin, a Soviet Parliament member from Estonia.

"Gorbachev must decide whether to solve [problems] by himself or they will be solved without his assistance through mutual negotiations between Lithuania and Russia, Latvia and Russia, and Estonia and Russia."

At the same time, Mr. Yeltsin has been sounding more moderate since his election. He told the Russian Parliament yesterday that members must not be wary of entering a new type of confederation and that he and Mr. Gorbachev will work together on a friendly basis. "I think Mikhail Sergeyevich took the first serious step and the next will be a discussion of questions on all topics," Mr. Yeltsin said.

The drive to improve economic conditions is the strongest engine behind these initial attempts at horizontal ties. The central government, which itself is attempting to reform the nation's economy as a further stage in perestroika, supports such contacts in theory as a logical part of the creation of a market economy.

In Washington, the White House welcomed the partial lifting of the embargo against Lithuania. The Bush administration sees the apparent easing of the Lithuanian crisis as a vindication of its policy on the Baltic states, which has avoided any sanctions against Moscow while quietly pressing both sides for a dialogue. ~~Members of Congress have indicated~~ they will not approve the trade pact signed by Presidents Bush and Gorbachev during the Washington summit until the embargo against Lithuania is lifted.

According to a Lithuanian spokeswoman there were no promises about further relaxation of the embargo, but the Soviet news agency Tass quoted Mrs. Prunskiene as saying after meeting with Mr. Ryzhkov that, "We have no doubts the economic blockade will be lifted."

Mr. Ryzhkov said negotiations could lead to full independent statehood for Lithuania, such as that enjoyed by Finland, Mrs. Prunskiene was quoted as saying by a Lithuanian spokeswoman contacted by the Associated Press. Mr. Ryzhkov suggested that negotiations on independence would take two to three years, the spokeswoman said.